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ABSTRACT

This booklet analyzes and summarizes responses of 12 Wisconsin school board presidents who were interviewed between April and October 1977. Each respondent was asked nine open-end questions dealing with the role of local school boards and the challenges facing them. Although the responses to the interview questions may reflect some prevailing attitudes and opinions among Wisconsin school board members, the 12 board presidents interviewed cannot be considered statistically representative of the 436 board presidents or 2,874 board members in Wisconsin. Also, because of the unstructured pattern of responses to the interview questions, it was not possible to use a consistent analysis format for all nine questions. Therefore each question is presented in turn, followed by a brief discussion of the board president's comments. Also included are several tables that summarize statistical data on the number and size of Wisconsin school boards, the sex of board members, and average salaries for board members. (JG)

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Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Barbara Thompson, Ph.D., State Superintendent

VIEWPOINTS OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS: EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CHALLENGES

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VIEWPOINTS OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CHALLENGES

Wisconsin School Boards

Chapter 120 of the Wisconsin Statutes, entitled "School District Government" describes the composition, responsibilities, and functions of local school district boards of education. This legislation is indicative of, and consistent with, the tradition of local governance and control of schools which has existed in Wisconsin since territorial days. Since the passage of significant federal and state legislation in the 1960's and 1970's some observers of, and participants in, the educational system have questioned whether "local control" is but a myth. Others have viewed recent legislative mandates as opportunities for local districts to obtain new resources, shape new programs, and serve students better, while retaining much of the local decision-making authority as to how federal and state directives are to be implemented.

Regardless of the philosophical issues involved, the fact remains that each of Wisconsin's 436 school districts is governed by an elected or appointed lay board comprised of district residents and this board has the responsibility for the governance and operation of the local school system. A superficial skimming of Chapter 120 reveals board responsibilities in a number of areas: management of the school district, general supervision of the schools, school teachers and administrative staff; determination of taxes for operation, maintenance, and debt retirement; repair of school buildings; insurance; use of school facilities; organization gradation, and government of the schools; pupil suspension and expulsion; agreements with other governmental units; tuition payments; materials and equipment; federal aid; financial management and auditing; contracting with teachers and other staff; filing of annual state reports; and various related responsibilities too detailed or numerous to mention in this review. In combination these duties constitute a significant responsibility for those citizens who serve on local school boards.

An excellent publication for school board members, *Opportunities Unlimited: A Guide For Wisconsin School Board Members* was written by Dr. Richard Rossmiller of the University of Wisconsin—Madison for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards and has served as a basic resource for local board members, through five editions and revisions, for over 15 years. This handbook, in a discussion of school board functions, stresses two major overriding responsibilities—policymaking and evaluation—in addition to other responsibilities such as keeping the public informed of all

aspects of the local school system and cooperating with other agencies related to the improvement of education in the local community. Particular emphasis is placed upon the need for *written policies* and the *continuous evaluation* of policies and the educational program through the analysis of *facts* rather than rumor or unsubstantiated criticism. The guide notes that school boards must be reasonable and that courts may have to decide what constitutes "reasonableness" based on the individual characteristic of each case, but that courts will not rule on the wisdom of regulations enacted by a board because this will mean substituting judicial discretion for that of the board. The point is also stressed that the school board is a unit and must act as a unit. Members of the board acting individually do not possess the corporate powers of the board and only decisions of the whole board taken while in legal session become legally binding. Additional areas of major responsibility of school boards discussed in the publication include qualifications of board members; legal requirements of school board meetings; relationship with the administrator who functions as executive officer of the board; relationship with school personnel including bargaining with employees; the organization, content, and nature of the educational program and special services; school finances; and school facilities, planning and management.

It is evident in reviewing both the relevant legislation and the *Opportunities Unlimited* guide that school boards have numerous and significant responsibilities and that school board membership, if effectively performed, can make significant demands upon the time, energy, and intellectual capabilities of the board members.

Characteristics of Wisconsin School Boards

The following information is based upon local school district reports during the 1976-77 school year as collected and compiled by the Department of Public Instruction's Information Systems Section.

Table 1
Total Wisconsin School Board Members
1967 to 1976-77

School Year	Total Districts	Total Board Members	Average Members Per Board
1967-68	493	3,052	6.2
1968-69	465	2,959	6.4
1969-70	457	2,898	6.3
1970-71	454	2,896	6.4
1971-72	444	2,858	6.4
1972-73	441	2,861	6.5
1973-74	436	2,862	6.6
1974-75	436	2,858	6.6
1975-76	435	2,871	6.6
1976-77	436	2,874	6.6

Table 2
Size of Wisconsin School Boards by District Type
1976-77 School Year

School Board Size	Types and Numbers of School Districts							
	City of 1st Class	City	Unified	Common Elem.[a]	Common K-12	Union High School	Totals	Percent of Total District
3	-	-	-	9	4	-	13	3.0%
5	-	2	-	44	88	6	140	32.1
7	-	24	8	-	181	4	217	49.8
9	-	12	9	-	38	1	60	13.8
11	-	1	-	-	2	-	3	0.7
13	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	0.2
15	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	0.4
Totals	1	41	17	53[a]	313	11	436	100.0%
Percent of Total Districts	0.2%	9.4%	4.0%	12.1%	71.8%	2.5%	100.0%	———

[a] — Includes 1 city elementary district, Jt. 1, City of Glendale.

Table 3
Change in Women Serving on Wisconsin School Boards — 1970-1976[a]

Board Members	1970-71		1976-77		Change 1970-1976	
	No.	Pct. of Total	No.	Pct. of Total	No.	Pct. Change
Women board members	325	11.3%	550	19.1%	+225	+69.2%
Men board members	2,571	88.7	2,324	80.9%	−247	− 9.6
Total board members	2,896	100.0%	2,874	100.0%	22	− 0.8%

Table 4

Salaries of Wisconsin School Board Members by School District TYPE — 1976-77 School Year

School District Size District	Total Dist.	Total Board Members	Districts That Do Not Pay Board Members: Total Dists.	% of Total	Total Board Members	1976-77 Budgeted Board Salaries[a]: Total Board Salaries	Total Pd. Bd. Members	Avg. Sal. Per Pd. Member
City of the First Class	1	15	0	-	-	$ 9,000	15	$600
City School Dists.	41	325	17	41.5	137	112,292	188	597
Unified School Dists.	17	137	3	17.6	27	42,070	110	382
Union High School Dists.	11	67	0	-	-	32,910	67	491
Elementary Sch. Dists.[b]	53	247	2	3.8	10	97,106	237	410
K-12 School Districts	313	2,083	9	2.9	65	1,030,291	2,018	510
Totals or Averages[c,d]	436	2,874	31	7.1%	239	1,323,699	2,635	502

a — Total budgeted for board salaries for 1976-77 as reported in the *Fall Report Part III*, Line 1011, Salaries, Board of Education.

b — Includes one city elementary district, Jt. 1, Glendale.

c — Wisconsin school board salaries represent slightly less than 1/10 of 1% of the total budgeted shared costs.

d — Average — $3,036 per district; $3,268 per district paying board salaries.

School Board Presidents' Survey Information

During January 1977, a letter was sent to school board presidents in fifteen selected Wisconsin school districts. The correspondence explained the purpose of a small interview study proposed by the DPI Bureau of Evaluation, Planning, Information and Research; invited their participation in the study; and enclosed a list of eight tentative questions for their review and consideration. Following another round of correspondence, twelve board presidents agreed to respond to nine interview items which were cooperatively developed. The twelve districts represented are shown below, with enrollment information and CESA location also indicated.

+5,000 Students	*CESA*	*2,000 - 5,000 Students*	*CESA*	*-2,000 Students*	*CESA*
Green Bay	CESA 9	Antigo	CESA 2	Gillett	CESA 3
Janesville	CESA 17	Chippewa Falls	CESA 6	Palmyra	CESA 18
LaCrosse	CESA 11	Platteville	CESA 14	Valders	CESA 10
Stevens Point	CESA 7	Rice Lake	CESA 4		
Superior	CESA 1				

The nine interview questions asked are listed below:

1. What do you view as the major problems that local school boards face at the present time?
2. Are there new challenges which you believe local school boards will have to deal with in the next five years?
3. Can you identify some positive (desirable) educational changes that are now occurring in your district, or which have occurred during the past several years?
4. Can you identify some negative (undesirable) educational changes that are now causing concern or have caused concern in your district in recent years?
5. What do you believe are the most difficult aspects of serving on a local school board?
6. Is there a need for more in-service training for school board members to enable them to serve more effectively? If so, what kinds of training?
7. If you could advise and inform administrators and teachers on how to work more effectively with local school boards, what suggestions would you share with them?
8. If you could advise and inform the general public regarding public interaction with and understanding of local boards, what suggestions would you share with them?
9. Do you have any opinions or suggestions regarding the Department of Public Instruction's role and relationship with local school districts?

Interviews were conducted during the period April - October 1977. As the result of Spring 1977 elections several participants were no longer president of the local school board but were retained in the study because of their recent experience in that position. Appreciation is expressed the participating board presidents, all of whom were extremely cooperative in showing their experience and viewpoints with their colleagues and other interested persons throughout the state.

Data Treatment

The twelve school board presidents involved in this study cannot in any way be considered statistically representative of the 436 board presidents in Wisconsin. While their responses to the interview items may reflect some prevailing attitudes and opinions of many board presidents and board members, it would be inappropriate to generalize from this very limited sample.

The open-ended questions used in the survey resulted in a wide variety of answers from respondents. Because of this unstructured response pattern, it is not possible to use a consistent analysis format for all ten questions. Instead, each is presented in a way that seems reasonable in light of the question itself and the responses received. This procedure is considered acceptable in view of the fact the study was intended to provide a forum for local views, not to "prove" certain points nor to statistically test predetermined hypotheses. In many instances, the responses received were not appropriate for quantitative analysis. However, major themes or patterns which were expressed by the respondents are noted. Multiple responses were given to many questions by many respondents so total responses may exceed the number of districts surveyed. In some instances particularly insightful or original comments and observations were made by respondents and such items are noted in the "Comments" section of appropriate items.

Board Presidents' Responses

Question 1: *What do you view as the major problems that school boards face at the present time?*

- Not unexpectedly, eleven board members (92%) cited budgetary constraints, lack of fiscal resources, state imposed cost controls and rising property taxes as being major local concerns and problems. The presence of a stagnant or declining pupil enrollment base was usually associated with the responses, especially the dificulty of explaining to the community why additional dollars and staff members are required each year to educate fewer students, resulting in ever-increasing per pupil costs.
- Nine respondents (75%) indicated problems associated with contract negotiations and employee unionization were of local importance. Excessive time requirements associated with the negotiations process and the lack of professional bargaining expertise by board members were frequent observations.
- Mandatory state and federal legislative requirements were noted as problem areas by five (42%) board presidents. While most respondents agreed with the educational purposes served by such mandates there was opposition to the prescriptiveness involved in terms of time, staff requirements, facilities and dollars costs and the loss or absence of adequate local discretion and flexibility was decried by board members.
- Three respondents (25%) indicated that a lack of local educational goals and priorities was of considerable concern and that diverse, ever-changing and ever-expanding public expectations regarding the schools placed local boards in an untenable position regarding financial allocations and program expansion or reduction.

Comments by Respondents

- Public apathy toward the school system appears to be viewed more as a continuing condition than a specific problem. While many parents are interested in their children in a specific school building situation, few taxpayers demonstrate a continuing degree of interest and understanding of the school district as a whole.
- Developing or adopting more credible measures of the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process and system is a matter of current and continuing concern. Standardized tests have their inadequacies, competency based education is as yet unproved, and the absence of agreed upon student outcomes makes almost everything the schools do either right or wrong depending on the individual viewpoint involved. Some method of developing goals and priorities is needed so program stability and rational curriculum development can occur and measures of effectiveness and efficiency can be related to agreed upon criteria and expectations.
- Administrators must be better prepared to function as effective managers. Problems associated with scarce resources, decline of student enrollment, excess facilities, unionization and the collective bargaining process, and other related developments are placing new managerial demands upon administrators which many are unable to respond to effectively.
- The problem of inexperienced, uninformed, single-issue board members causes ineffectiveness at the local level, especially when this is compounded by the frequent turnover of board membership and the lack of a knowledgeable, experienced core of public representatives.

Question 2: *Are there new challenges which you believe local school boards will have to deal with in the next five years?*

- Two areas of new or continued challenges were each identified by seven board presidents (58%); i.e., fiscal and taxation problems, and problems associated with declining pupil enrollments. Included in the declining enrollment responses were specific concerns about staff reductions, facilities usage and educational program implications. Fiscal concerns included comments regarding the continued erosion of local control as state level funding increases; the continued inadequacy of the property tax system as the basis for local school support and ever-increasing personnel costs as the result of annual public employee salary increases.
- The provision of basic educational skills or minimum competencies was cited by four respondents (33%).
- Three respondents each (25%) cited public accountability and credibility; teacher negotiations and strikes; and defining the role of the schools as challenges in the near future.

- A variety of other new areas of activity were forecast including: student rights, alternative schools; energy usage and conservation, gifted and talented students, year-around schools, early childhood education, and neglected children.

Question 3: *Are there positive educational changes that have occurred in recent years in your district, or are new occurring?*

- Over twenty-five responses were received regarding specific instructional/curricular improvements as viewed by board presidents including better handicapped children programs (6); broader, better coordinated curriculum in general (4): vocational education program improvement (3); reading and library/media program development (3); and health (1), consumerism (1), business education (1), environmental education (1), and improved girls athletic programs (1).
- Miscellaneous responses of a wide variety included increased involvement of parents, volunteers, and advisory groups (2); improved school-community relations (1); modified flexible scheduling (1); improved teacher salaries (1); higher number of college bound graduates (1); better discipline (1); management reorganization (2); an improved school newspaper (1); and provision for early high school graduation (1).

Comments by Respondents

- In general board presidents were able to identify areas of perceived improvement quickly and indicated a number of times that state and federal mandates were often the basis for movement at the local level, even though specific requirements of such mandates were not always appreciated nor were accompanying funds made available to assure and support compliance.

- Respondents generally indicated that local educational opportunities and resources for learning had never been better and that pupils today have better programs, staff, and equipment available than provided to students in previous years.

Question 4: *Are there negative educational changes that have caused concern in recent years in your school district, or are currently causing concern?*

- Board presidents indicated a broad range of negative changes but no single issue dominated their responses. One group of concerns was

related to pupil behavior and included the use of alcohol and drugs; vandalism to school property; excessive absenteeism; lack of student discipline and honesty; and the problem of unacceptable pupil competence levels in basic areas such as reading, language, and mathematics.

- Another group of responses centered upon organizational and community considerations such as excessive union activity; open campus, automatic promotions and student suspension policies; biased local newspaper coverage; a general lack of public interest in the schools; and the presence of well-organized, vocal, single issue citizen groups which are difficult to deal with in a rational manner.

- Other responses related to the negative effects of "paper compliance" with the 13 Standards; the difficult aspects of special education program expansion in terms of added costs, personnel and facilities; "wasteful, inappropriate" school programs such as driver education; the effects of new state legislation regarding public employee's bargaining process; and an inadequate number of local students continuing their education beyond high school.

Comments by Respondents

- A strong and articulate statement was made by one respondent regarding educational "innovations" of the 1960's and 1970's which have been "foisted upon" local boards of education by federal and state agencies and even local administrators. This viewpoint expressed reservations about how "innovative" many new projects and programs actually are, or whether they are only casual imitations of someone else's ideas which have not had adequate conceptual or research development. In addition, the point was made that such changes are frequently made without adequate local study, purpose, or commitment; that the long-term effects are often not positive; and such efforts usually disappear when the federal or state funds are exhausted.

Question 5: *What do you believe are the most difficult and/or frustrating aspects of serving on a local school board?*

- While board presidents generally spoke favorably regarding their role and functions, there were numerous observations made regarding the day-to-day reality of serving on a local school board. Six respondents (50%) volunteered that time demands are very great and that inadequate time exists to do all of the study and work that a good board president should do. An equal number of respondents, (50%) said the presence of diverse community pressures, often of a conflicting nature, made board membership difficult especially when community factionalism was involved

and special interest groups were vocal, well organized, and not given to rational discussion of the issues.

- Five respondents (41%) stated that responding intelligently to diverse public and educational issues was a great challenge and required training and experience that was not necessarily found among lay board members. An equal number cited the negotiations and employee relations situation as a difficult area of operation, probably as one of the best examples of the point made above regarding the need for specialized knowledge and experience.

A variety of other responses received from board presidents in lesser numbers included:

- The difficulty of limiting the board to appropriate governance and policy issues rather then becoming overly involved in routing administrative and instructional matters.
- Problems of communicating effectively with the public, especially if everyone in the community considers themselves an educational expert, but in fact is somewhat ignorant of the constraints, resources, and other information and implications the board must consider.
- Focusing on educational issues rather than just reacting to special interests of teachers and parents.
- The problem of local businessmen serving as board members and losing business as the result of unpopular decisions or positions regarding board matters.

Question 6: *Is there a need for more inservice training for school board members to enable them to serve more effectively? If so, what kinds of training?*

- In a nearly unanimous response eleven (91%) of the respondents indicated the current level and variety of inservice opportunities offered by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Department of Public Instruction and other agencies and organizations are adequate and appropriate as they currently exist. One respondent felt that too many opportunities are provided and that a lesser number of higher quality offerings would be better.

Comments by Respondents

- Most board members lack the time required to participate in inservice opportunities; weekdays and weekends are both bad, especially for self-employed persons who lose income when at training sessions.

- Local administrators must make a conscious and continued effort to educate the local board and not depend entirely upon outside organizations and activities.
- There is no substitute for on-the-job experience to improve the quality of board members services; outside activities are helpful and can compliment local service but cannot substitute for sustained, local involvement.
- Legal issues and mandates are often the most troublesome for boards and training sessions in these areas make a real contribution.
- More frequent mailings of information by appropriate agencies and organizations to the total board membership would be much more effective than expecting administrators and board presidents to distribute materials to board members.
- As is often the case in other areas, board members who need the most help in understanding issues and learning how to function as effective members are the same people who don't have the interest or make the commitment to participate in self-improvement inservice activities.
- Selecting and retaining local educational priorities so effective sustained action can occur is a very difficult task.
- Coping with unrealistic federal and state laws which seem to be enacted without knowledge or consideration of local conditions, capacities and circumstances.
- Dealing with board members themselves who lack knowledge, experience and good judgement and who may have a special interest viewpoint or generally negative attitude which causes problems for the board and makes it difficult for administrators to function effectively.

Question 7: *If you could advise and inform administrators and teachers on how to work more effectively with local school boards, what suggestions would you share with them?*

Comments by Respondents

- Board members should participate in staff inservice meetings to improve communication and increase understanding.
- Boards and teachers should conduct negotiations alone, without outside advocates, consultants or experts to complicate the process.
- Administrators and teachers both often fail to understand the board's proper role and what it can or can't do regarding goals, policies and budgets; too often too many small issues and grievances are pushed onto the board.
- Teachers and administrators assume the board is not well informed; too little credit is given for their knowledge level; educators try to "snow"

the board with jargon instead of being honest and objective and they lose credibility by doing so.

- The board has a responsibility to let the administrators know openly and honestly what is wanted and expected, and the responsibility to change the situation if results don't occur.
- Professional staff members should advise the board of their plans and needs as early as possible; many times proposals come to the board too late for positive action or appropriate consideration.
- Administrators and teachers should prepare and present material more succinctly; board intelligence should not be underestimated but it should not be assumed the board knows more than it does about specific issues; negative news should not be hidden from the board; administrators need specific inservice education regarding effective board interaction.
- Professional educators must realize that local boards are composed of lay citizens who have other fulltime commitments.
- Teachers need to decide if they're going to be professionals working in a cooperative relationship with the board or whether they're union members who are going to be in an adversary relationship because of the employer/employee roles.
- Boards must be kept well informed and the chain of command concept is important and useful if not too rigid; teachers should feel free to talk openly and honestly with the board as their viewpoints are very important.
- Board membership requires being able to make difficult decisions and living with them; not everyone will be happy with the board members all the time.
- Colleges and universities do not instruct teachers adequately about the governance of schools; teachers do not generally understand the legal or practical aspects of school board operation; teachers must recognize that negotiations are a political process and not a personal matter.
- Selecting good administrators is the board's most important job.

Question 8: *If you could advise and inform the general public regarding public interaction with and understanding of local boards, what suggestions would you share with them?*

Comments by Respondents

- The public should attend school board meetings, especially if they are unhappy with board actions; uninformed, after-the-fact criticism by citizens is not helpful to anyone.
- The public should attend board meetings to get the facts behind issues and decisions, not make snap judgments based on erroneous or nonexistent information.

- Unfortunately in some districts the board is considered "elitist" and citizens hesitate to express their personal concerns; more public attendance would help solve this problem.
- Irresponsible newspaper coverage can seriously affect the board's relationship with the community as most citizens only know what they read about board decisions and actions.
- The "Watergate" psychology of suspecting the actions of all public officials, combined with "investigative" reporting, creates unnecessary adversary relationships in the community.
- The public often does not recognize the problems involved in changing the educational system and process to meet their child's specific, individual needs, e.g. an adjusted bus transportation schedule.
- The public has a right to expect that board members will always keep the welfare of the students in mind as their major consideration and not follow personal biases in a way that harms the educational process.
- Most people are probably more interested and involved in their neighborhood school than in the total school district and this is understandable, but an effort should be made to stay continually aware of district operations also and not just react when emotional issues arise.
- Boards and administrators must listen carefully to an often inarticulate public to understand the message the public is speaking.
- The public must respect the integrity of the board, administrators, and teaching staff and recognize they are honorable people trying to do a difficult job well.
- The public must put some time and effort into understanding educational issues to avoid superficial judgments; communication is a two-way process and both the public and the board must make efforts to listen well.
- Boards must take the time to adequately discuss educational issues fully and publicly and not be distracted by other business to an undue degree.
- Citizens may talk to individual board members about problems but it must be realized the board functions as a whole and can make decisions only in that way.
- Board members serve in part-time jobs which involve a variety of problems and much time; public support and appreciation is needed or good people are driven off the board.
- The legal authority and responsibility of the school board must be emphasized to the community; the board must operate in a serious and legal manner.

Question 9: *Do you have any opinions or suggestions regarding the Department of Public Instruction's role and relationship with local school districts?*

Comments by Respondents

- Increased, D.P.I. assistance to districts is needed in the areas of consumer education and agriculture.
- DPI must be careful not to by-pass the local board and administration; one experience was bad in this respect.
- DPI curriculum consultant services are too limited to be of real value; DPI should employ more consultants or forget the idea; perhaps CESAs should provide such services.
- DPI appointed committees and commissions seem to accomplish little; their purpose, role, objectives, and products all need to be well defined in advance.
- DPI assistance has been received when requested and of high quality.
- DPI on-site review of the 13 Standards was a thorough and helpful service.
- DPI and the state legislature often involve themselves in areas they know nothing about and local districts then have to live with the consequences of their ignorance.
- More DPI research and dissemination should occur; local districts will never have the funds to do this work.
- Assistance is needed in planning for declining enrollments, better data and data analysis is needed from DPI; contradictory projections are given by state personnel.
- DPI's role in the educational system must be analyzed and defined; a careful analysis is needed to establish DPI's priorities.
- Local boards are generally not aware of the DPI and don't need to be if local administrators do their jobs well; DPI support of WASB is the best assistance that can be provided to local districts; DPI liaison is basically an administrative function not a board responsibility.
- Positive DPI leadership is needed in the areas of negotiations and strikes and practical approaches to the 13 Standards and implementation of the special education program legislation.

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